

Teaching politics in the U.S. History classroom

By: [Wayne Journell](#)

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Abstract:

In the United State, courses on civics or government are often marginalized in most states' social studies curricula in favor of courses in United States or world history. The origins of this history-dominated approach have roots in the debates between the American Historical Association and the National Education Association at the turn of the previous century. Even as a model for comprehensive social studies became the norm for American public education during the 20th century, courses in U.S. history remained at the center of the social studies curriculum.

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Article:

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Teaching Politics in the U.S. History Classroom

Wayne Journell

University of North Carolina at Greensboro

IN THE UNITED STATES, courses on civics or government are often marginalized in most states' social studies curricula in favor of courses in United States or world history. The origins of this history-dominated approach have roots in the debates between the American Historical Association and the National Education Association at the turn of the previous century.¹ Even as a model for comprehensive social studies became the norm for American public education during the 20th century, courses in U.S. history remained at the center of the social studies curriculum.

Research suggests that courses in civics or government are often considered afterthoughts in schools' social studies curricula, either offered as electives or viewed as lacking academic rigor.² Unlike courses in U.S. history, which are often required in multiple years throughout students' educational experiences, offerings of civics and government courses are often dependent on the geographic placement of schools or the socioeconomic status of a school's student population. Research has shown that schools located in suburban areas that cater to white, upper-middle-class households tend to offer more high-quality civics and government courses than urban or rural schools that service lower-socioeconomic, high minority student bodies.³

If students are unable to receive instruction about politics and the workings of American government in courses specifically designated as

such, then they need to acquire it elsewhere. In this article, I argue for an increased emphasis on political and civic concepts in U.S. history courses, which are a required part of the social studies curriculum in every state. With only slight modifications to how U.S. history is taught in most secondary classrooms, teachers can use their curriculum to further students' understanding of contemporary political issues and events.

The Importance of Political Instruction

Although not as widely publicized as American students' lackluster knowledge of U.S. history, our students have fared almost as poorly in assessments of civic knowledge. National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) data over the past two decades show that a large percentage of students fail to demonstrate even basic knowledge of civic concepts.⁴ The most recent NAEP assessment, for example, found that only 64% of graduating seniors were deemed to possess a "basic" understanding of civic knowledge, and of those students, only 24% scored well enough to be considered "proficient."⁵ When the results are broken down by topics, analyses of NAEP data suggests that students especially struggle with questions related to politics and political processes. Richard G. Niemi and Jane Junn found, for example, that 40% of students were unaware of the functions of political parties in basic civic processes, such as passing laws or establishing nominees for the presidency and other federal offices.⁶ These data support the findings of qualitative studies that suggest secondary students often are disinterested in politics or unaware of how politics influences aspects of the federal government.⁷

The obvious concern behind this lack of political knowledge is that poorly informed students ultimately develop into politically illiterate citizens. Throughout the political science literature are studies suggesting that Americans, as a whole, are becoming less knowledgeable about politics and government, less interested in how government works, and more distrusting of politicians and other public officials.⁸ Moreover, levels of political apathy and distrust are consistently higher in younger Americans (those under 30), especially among those from lower-socioeconomic households.⁹

Admittedly, a variety of factors could be contributing to young Americans' lack of civic knowledge and participation. Research suggests, however, that when students are privy to a high-quality civics or government curriculum, regardless of other factors such as race or socioeconomic status, they tend to become more politically informed and active.¹⁰ In other words, the more exposure to political and civic knowledge that students receive, the greater the chances are that they will develop a better understanding about the political world around them.

Returning to the focus of this article, for students to truly become knowledgeable about politics and civic processes, they must be exposed to this information beyond the semester of civics or government they may happen to take. Integration throughout the curriculum becomes even more important in cases where students do not have the option of taking these types of courses at all. Survey U.S. history courses in middle and high schools are natural venues for political instruction, given that the traditional curriculum is typically a political history in which the story of the United States is told through a narrative framed largely by political events, leaders, and movements.

Despite this political emphasis, middle and high school U.S. history curricula rarely delve into the political bickering that surrounded landmark governmental acts or discuss how historical events have helped shape today's political landscape. Not only does such an approach lend itself to a more nuanced understanding of U.S. history, it also achieves the pedagogical goal of learning history as a way of better understanding the present.¹¹ In the remainder of this article, I will offer teachers several ways in which they can infuse a contemporary understanding of politics into their history classroom.

Discussing the Politics Behind Landmark Legislation

If one spends enough time watching cable news or browsing political blogs, it is inevitable that he or she will come across a pundit making the case that partisan politics is “worse now than at any other point in American history.” The common rhetoric is that every presidential election is more negative than any that have preceded it, and today's Congress is more dysfunctional than back in the “good old days” of American politics.¹² Without a historical perspective, however, one might be inclined to agree, and research suggests that Americans' opinions of the presidency, Congress, and government in general continue to plummet, largely due to these perceptions.¹³

The whitewashed history that students receive in a typical survey of U.S. history does little to challenge these notions. Landmark pieces of legislation are given laudatory names such as “The Great Compromise” or “The Missouri Compromise” or simple titles that reflect the ultimate outcome of the legislation (e.g., “The Pendleton Civil Service Reform Act”). Without proper context, students may see the word “compromise” and conjure an image of austere men sitting around a table calmly agreeing to put aside their own beliefs for the good of the country, which stands in stark contrast to the posturing and vitriolic rhetoric that students see on television between Democrats and Republicans as they attempt to

forge “compromises” like the one reached to avert the “fiscal cliff” at the beginning of 2013. Similarly, students may assume that legislation, such as the Social Security Act of 1935, which is still in place today, must have been widely agreed upon and accepted, when in reality, many of the landmark pieces of legislation in U.S. history have been as contentious as the battle over the Affordable Health Care Act of 2010.

To provide students with a richer and more accurate understanding of history, teachers should discuss the political battles surrounding these landmark pieces of legislation. A famous quotation often attributed to German Chancellor Otto van Bismarck is that “laws are like sausages, it is better not to see them being made.” A great example of this seedy approach to legislation can be found in *Lincoln*, Steven Spielberg’s recent biopic of Abraham Lincoln based on the work of presidential historian Doris Kearns Goodwin.¹⁴ Most students probably do not know that the ratification of the Thirteenth Amendment, often taught as a natural outcome of the Civil War, became a hotly debated topic, even among Northern politicians. They would also be surprised to learn that “Honest Abe” employed a variety of underhanded tactics, such as bribery, patronage, and political intimidation, to ensure ratification. Many of these same tactics are regularly being used by politicians today; however, our twenty-four hour news cycle makes this type of political behavior less likely to go unnoticed, and as a result, Americans are more likely to view their elected officials as dishonest.

Another example of political confrontation can be found in the Compromise of 1850. History textbooks discuss the outcomes of the legislation and the role of the “great compromiser” Henry Clay, but often omit the political battle that played out within Congress before the compromise was passed. The debate languished over several months and grew so contentious in the Senate that Mississippi Senator Henry Foote pulled a pistol on Senator Thomas Benton of Missouri during one particularly rancorous verbal altercation on the Senate floor.¹⁵

Teachers could easily explore the political unrest behind this “compromise” by having students analyze major floor speeches held during the legislative debates. Two of the most famous speeches were from South Carolina Senator John C. Calhoun, who opposed the compromise, and Senator Daniel Webster of Massachusetts, who supported the legislation. Both speeches are fairly long and would be difficult reads for most secondary students; however, even word clouds made from each of the speeches show the different ideologies at play during this debate (**Figures 1 and 2**).

Calhoun, who was dying and too sick to deliver the speech himself, argued that the compromise was a futile attempt at trying to maintain a Union that was already dividing. As one can see from the words Calhoun

uses, his speech highlighted the differences between the Southern and Northern states, particularly over the question of slavery. Calhoun's stark stance against the compromise only served to embolden his already larger-than-life reputation in the South as a rabid advocate of states' rights. Calhoun, however, would not witness the outcome of the debate; he died less than four weeks after this speech was given.

Webster countered Calhoun three days later in a famous speech that quickly became known as the "Seventh of March Speech." In this speech, which he begins by stating, "I wish to speak today, not as a Massachusetts man, nor as a Northern man, but as an American, and as a member of the Senate of the United States," Webster pushes for the compromise, arguing that accepting slavery where it already existed was a small price to pay to maintain the union. The speech was a political success and helped generate momentum for the compromise. Webster, however, became a martyr for his stance, as those from the largely abolitionist New England states admonished him as a traitor and a coward. Webster resigned his Senate seat in disgrace four months later and ended his political career as President Millard Fillmore's Secretary of State.¹⁶

The compromise ultimately passed, largely due to the leadership of Clay and the untimely death of President Zachary Taylor, who had opposed the compromise. The point of this exercise, however, is to show students that partisan politics is nothing new. The ratification of the Thirteenth Amendment and the Compromise of 1850 are only two of many contentious pieces of legislation that could be explored throughout the typical U.S. history curriculum. Like the tax debate that occurred during both the 2012 presidential campaign and the subsequent lame duck session, the differences that separated the two sides in these historical examples were ones fundamental to the identities of the major parties that existed at that time. In this type of partisan environment, political discourse is going to naturally become combative, and those who appear to abandon core principles of their party, such as Webster in 1850 and Speaker of the House John Boehner in the recent "fiscal cliff" compromise, will be vilified by those in the extreme elements of their parties.

In other words, American politics really hasn't changed that much. If anything, one could argue that today's partisan battles are actually more civil than those that occurred in the 19th century. Our current elected leaders are prohibited from bringing weapons into Congress, and threats of physical actions among legislators are rare—most Americans would probably view that as progress. By providing this type of historical understanding to students, they can better contextualize the current partisan environment in the United States and perhaps not fall victim to the hyperboles being articulated in popular media.



Figure 1: Word cloud of John C. Calhoun's speech to the Senate on March 4, 1950.¹⁷



Figure 2: Word cloud of Daniel Webster’s speech to the Senate on March 7, 1950.¹⁸

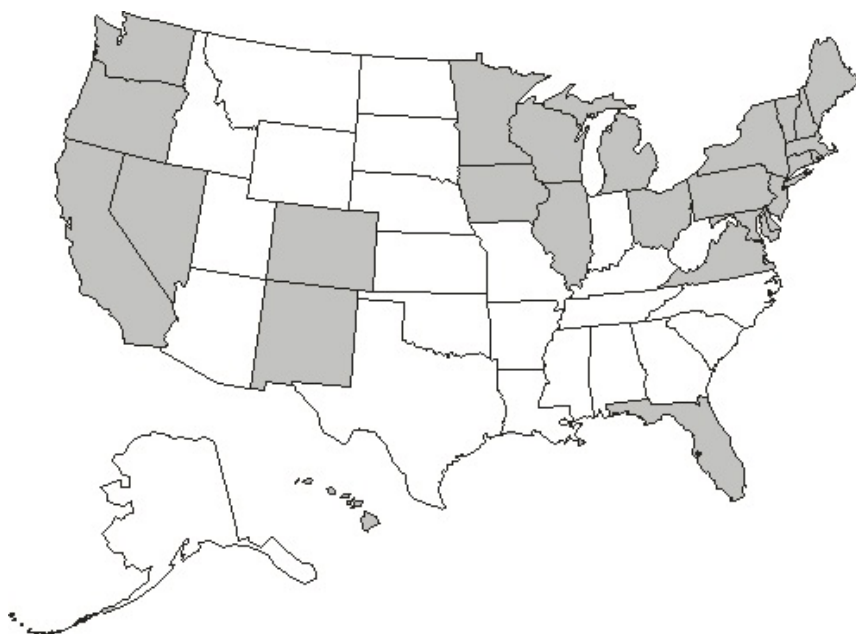


Figure 4: Electoral map of the 2012 Elections.

Civil War.²⁰ To update the examples he gives in his most recent book to include the 2012 election, **Figures 3 and 4** compare the electoral maps of the 1860 and 2012 elections. In both cases, the shaded states are those that voted for the winning candidate.

Although the issues of the day and the platforms of both political parties changed dramatically between 1860 and 2012, it is interesting to note the similarities between the two maps. The Northeast, Southeast, Midwest, and Western parts of the nation, for the most part, have remained ideologically homogeneous. Teachers could use this comparison to show the roots of the deep political and ideological differences that are highlighted every election cycle. In other words, the United States was a nation of “red states” and “blue states” long before it was fashionable to use that terminology.

What it means to be a “red state” or a “blue state” has changed over time, however. Again, teachers can illustrate this ideological change using electoral maps and regional patterns. Consider, for example, the states typically described as the “Solid South,” specifically South Carolina, Georgia, Alabama, and Mississippi. From the end of Reconstruction



Figure 5: States that voted Democratic (shaded) in the Election of 1928.

to 1960, those four states voted solidly Democratic.²¹ Even in the most lopsided Republican electoral victory during that time period, the 1928 Election, those four states were part of a solid Democratic bloc (**Figure 5**).

From 1964 to 2012, however, those four states have voted, with few exceptions, solidly Republican.²² Again, the most lopsided Democratic electoral victory during that time period, the 1996 Election, provides a stark example of the homogenous ideology of this region of the United States. As one can see in **Figure 6**, the support for Republican Bob Dole was located predominately in the Southeast and Midwestern part of the country.

The question for students to consider, then, is whether the collective ideology of those residing within those states changed or whether the ideologies of the Democratic and Republican parties shifted. The answer, of course, is a combination of both factors. For example, despite being the “Party of Lincoln” that freed the slaves, the Republican Party began to lose support of African Americans in the wake of economic opportunities provided by the New Deal and increased calls for civil rights legislation by Democratic politicians.²³ This ideological shift by the Democratic Party caused many conservative Democrats, such as South Carolina Senator Strom Thurmond, to join the Republican Party and was coupled by the geographical Great Migration of approximately five million African Americans from the South to the North between 1940 and 1970.

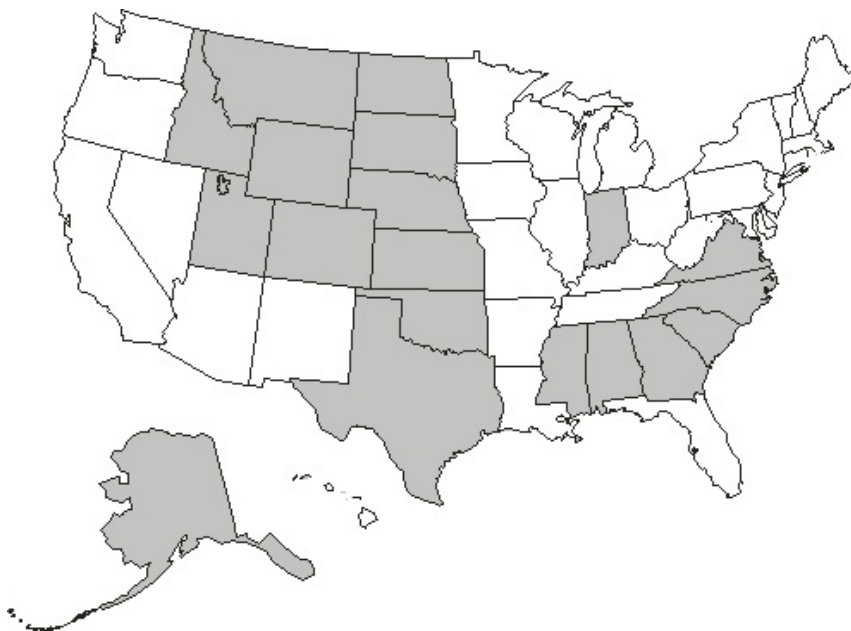


Figure 6: States that voted Republican (shaded) in the Election of 1996.

Civil rights and population shifts are only two causes of this specific ideological change, but the larger point is that teachers can use electoral maps to show students that political ideologies often change over time. In other words, what it means to be a Democrat or a Republican in 2013 could change over the next several decades. Factions within each current party, such as the Tea Party movement within the Republican Party, could be compared to other splinter parties throughout history, and students could use recent electoral data to predict future electoral shifts.

Creating Political Links Within the Curriculum

Although landmark legislation and the Electoral College provide logical links to contemporary political events, the U.S. history curriculum is filled with potential opportunities to creatively tie historical events to current political issues. For example, discussions of the division between the Federalists and Anti-Federalists and specific issues, such as the creation of a National Bank, could easily be compared to the ideological beliefs

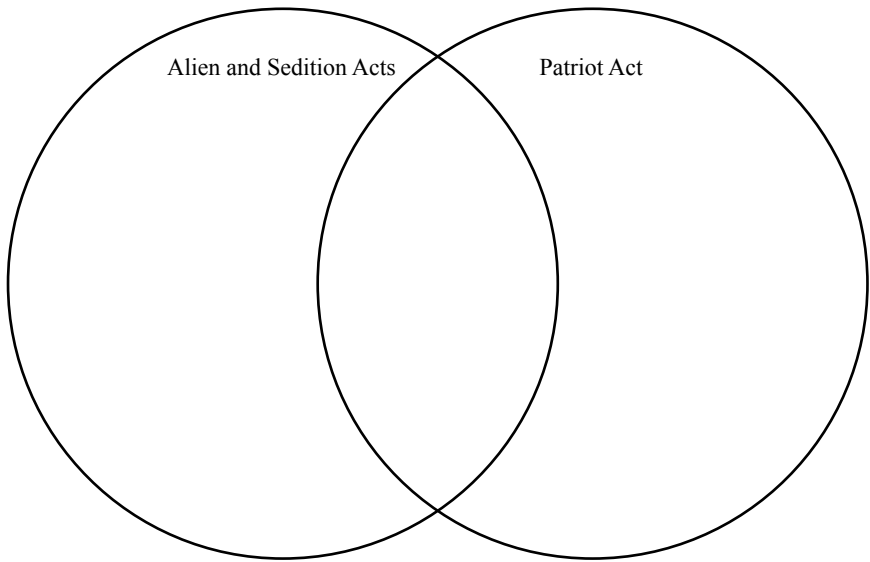


Figure 7: Venn diagram for analyzing the Alien and Sedition Acts and Patriot Act.

of the current Democratic and Republican parties. Students should be able to recognize that, although the specific issues may be different, the fundamental disagreement over “big government” and “small government” has existed since the nation’s founding.

Specific historical events can also be compared to current political debates. The Alien and Sedition Acts of 1798 provide an interesting comparison to the Patriot Act passed under President George W. Bush and reauthorized by President Barack Obama in 2011. Both laws restrict rights of citizens in favor of protecting the nation, and both fostered controversy upon their passage. While the Patriot Act has been accepted, although far from universally, as a necessary precaution against future terrorist attacks, the Alien and Sedition Acts were extremely unpopular and helped ensure President Adams’ defeat in the Election of 1800. Teachers could have students complete a Venn diagram similar to the one in **Figure 7** in which they compare the historical, legal, and political contexts between the two pieces of legislation.

The concept of federalism also creates opportunities for discussions of issues pertaining to states’ rights. Issues such as the death penalty and a state’s right-to-work status have been debated over much of the 20th century and continue to spark political disagreement today. Antiquated topics, however, can also provide links to current political issues. Discussions

of state policies on social issues, such as segregation and the right to use birth control, can be compared to modern examples, such as several states' decisions to legalize gay marriage and marijuana in 2012. As teachers discuss how historical conflicts related to federalism were resolved, usually through Supreme Court decisions, they can then have students use that knowledge to chart potential pathways for current social issues to become laws of the land.

Conclusion

These examples are only a few of the ways in which teachers can use the U.S. history curriculum to discuss contemporary political issues. Each of the strategies mentioned in this article satisfies the goal of the National Council for the Social Studies to highlight change over time as part of historical instruction.²⁴ More importantly, they provide students with a valuable context of the current political landscape that they may not receive elsewhere. Given both the importance of political knowledge in creating civically literate citizens and the prominence of U.S. history within the typical social studies curriculum, it is imperative that teachers use the story of American history as a way to educate students about the present state of politics in the United States.

Notes

1. For a summary of the debate between the American Historical Association and National Education Association, refer to Joseph Watras, "Debating the Curriculum: Social Studies or History, 1892-1937," *The Social Studies* 93, no. 6 (November-December 2002): 245-250.

2. Richard G. Niemi and Julia Smith, "Enrollments in High School Government Classes: Are We Short-Changing Both Citizenship and Political Science Training?" *PS: Political Science & Politics* 34, no. 2 (June 2001): 281-287.

3. Ibid.; Wayne Journell, "Teaching the 2008 Presidential Election at Three Demographically Diverse Schools: An Exercise in Neoliberal Governmentality," *Educational Studies: A Journal of the American Educational Studies Association* 47, no. 2 (2011): 133-159; Joseph Kahne and Ellen Middaugh, "High Quality Civic Education: What Is It and Who Gets It?" *Social Education* 72, no. 1 (January-February 2008): 34-39.

4. Richard G. Niemi and Jane Junn, *Civic Education: What Makes Students Learn* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1998); U.S. Department of Education, *Civics 2010: National Assessment of Educational Progress at Grades, 4, 8, and 12* (Washington, D.C.: National Center for Educational Statistics, 2010).

5. U.S. Department of Education.

6. Niemi and Junn.
7. See, for example, Wayne Journell, "Teaching Politics in Secondary Education: Analyzing Instructional Methods From the 2008 Presidential Election," *The Social Studies* 102, no. 6 (November-December 2011): 231-241; Journell, "Teaching the 2008 Presidential Election."
8. Three widely cited works detailing this growing sense of political apathy in the United States are Michael X. Delli Carpini and Scott Keeter, *What Americans Know About Politics and Why It Matters* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1996); John R. Hibbing and Elizabeth Theiss-Morse, *Stealth Democracy: Americans Beliefs About How Government Should Work* (Cambridge, United Kingdom: Cambridge University Press, 2002); and Robert D. Putnam, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2000).
9. Emily Hoban Kirby and Kei Kawashima-Ginsberg, "The Youth Vote in 2008," *Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement*, <http://www.civicyouth.org/PopUps/FactSheets/FS_youth_Voting_2008_updated_6.22.pdf>; Thomas H. Sander and Robert D. Putnam, "Still Bowling Alone? The Post-9/11 Split," *Journal of Democracy* 21, no. 1 (January 2010): 9-16.
10. See, for example, Kahne and Middaugh; Brett L. M. Levy, "Fostering Cautious Political Efficacy Through Civic Advocacy Projects: A Mixed Methods Case Study of an Innovative High School Class," *Theory and Research in Social Education* 39, no. 2 (Spring 2011): 238-277; Rebecca M. Callahan, Chandra Mueller, and Kathryn S. Schiller, "Preparing for Citizenship: Immigrant High School Students' Curriculum and Socialization," *Theory and Research in Social Education* 36, no. 2 (April 2008): 6-31; Norman Nie and D. Sunshine Hillygus, "Education and Democratic Citizenship," in *Making Good Citizens: Education and Civil Society*, ed. Diane Ravitch and Joseph P. Viteritti (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2001), 30-57; Joel Westheimer and Joseph Kahne, "What Kind of Citizen: The Politics of Educating for Democracy," *American Educational Research Journal* 41, no. 2 (Summer 2004): 237-269.
11. See John Dewey, *Democracy and Education* (New York: Free Press, 1916), 207-218.
12. Case in point: A quick Google search found articles from both sides of the aisle claiming that the 2012 Presidential Race was the "nastiest" and dirtiest" campaign ever (FOX News, "Heated Debate: Is 2012 Race the Dirtiest Campaign in History?" FOXNews.com, 23 August 2012, <<http://nation.foxnews.com/juan-williams/2012/08/23/heated-debate-2012-race-dirtiest-campaign-history>>; Nancy Cordes, "What Substance? Campaign Attacks get Nastier than Ever," CBSNews.com, 15 August 2012, <http://www.cbsnews.com/8301-18563_162-57494114/what-substance-campaign-attacks-get-nastier-than-ever/>). It seems these commentators forgot about President Cleveland's critics making hay out of his illegitimate child during the 1884 campaign or a pro-Jefferson newspaper calling John Adams "old, querulous, bald, blind, crippled, [and] toothless," in 1796.
13. Hibbing and Theiss-Morse.
14. Doris Kearns Goodwin, *Team of Rivals: The Political Genius of Abraham Lincoln* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2005).
15. United States Senate, "April 3, 1950: Bitter Feelings in the Senate Chamber," <http://www.senate.gov/artandhistory/history/minute/Bitter_Feelings_In_the_Senate_Chamber.htm>.
16. United States Senate, "March 7, 1950: Speech Costs Senator His Seat," <http://www.senate.gov/artandhistory/history/minute/Speech_Costs_Senator_His_Seat.htm>.
17. This word cloud was made using a copy of Calhoun's speech found at <<http://www.nationalcenter.org/CalhounClayCompromise.html>>.

18. This word cloud was made using a truncated copy of Webster's speech found at <<http://www.dartmouth.edu/~dwebster/speeches/seventh-march.html>>.

19. Journell, "Teaching Politics in Secondary Education"; Journell, "Teaching the 2008 Presidential Election".

20. James W. Loewen, *Teaching What Really Happened: How to Avoid the Tyranny of Textbooks and Get Students Excited About Doing History* (New York: Teachers College Press, 2010).

21. In 1948, South Carolina, Alabama, and Mississippi voted for the States Rights Democratic Party, also known as the Dixiecrats.

22. In 1968, Georgia, Alabama, and Mississippi voted for conservative candidate George Wallace, who was running under the American Independent Party. In 1976, all four states voted Democratic as part of the Watergate backlash. In 1980 and 1992, Georgia voted for the Democratic candidate.

23. This process was slow; in the 1930s, for example, the vast majority of Democratic candidates in the South were supported by the Ku Klux Klan. By the 1948 Democratic National Convention, however, President Truman had issued a public call for increased civil rights, which led many conservative Democrats to flee the party.

24. National Council for the Social Studies, *National Curriculum Standards for Social Studies* (Silver Spring, MD: National Council for the Social Studies, 2010).

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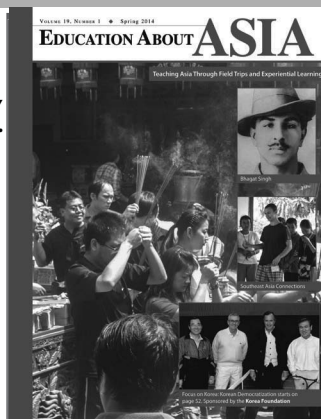


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